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# Towards an open cinema: Revisiting Alain Bergala's *The Cinema Hypothesis* within a global field of film education

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## Abstract

This paper reconsiders *The Cinema Hypothesis* and the propensity of Alain Bergala's cine-pedagogy to serve as an agent of interconnectivity within a slowly emergent global field of film education. Drawing upon some of the debates surrounding de-Westernizing film studies (Bâ and Higbee, 2012), this study explores notions of the global before situating a re-evaluation of *The Cinema Hypothesis* within that frame. Analysis focuses in particular on Bergala's: (1) particularized approach to cinema; (2) insistence upon a proximity between theory and practice; (3) asystematized approaches to analysis; (4) problematic relationship with canons; and (5) theory of disruption.

**Keywords:** global; film education; de-Westernizing; Bergala; disruption; universalism

Given the struggles faced by film educators worldwide to counter the peripherality of film in diverse curricula, it is perhaps unsurprising that a broad, global awareness of the wider discipline of film education and a cross-fertilization of different national and cultural approaches have been long in establishing themselves. Thus, semi-hidden histories of film education lie waiting the world over to be unearthed and connected. However, Alain Bergala's *The Cinema Hypothesis* has received its first English translation at a time when a growing number of film education programmes and research initiatives, particularly those in Europe, are starting to articulate a notable international impulse. Projects such as the Cinémathèque française's ongoing 'Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse' programme (for which Bergala serves as the 'artistic lead'), the BFI-led Screening Literacy survey and its subsequent Film Framework document, A Bao A Qu's international Moving Cinema project, the Institut Français's international European Cinema Education for Youth (CinEd), UNESCO's World Cities of Film, and the *Film Education Journal* itself are all indicative of a growing tendency to reach beyond the boundaries of locality and nationality to establish dialogues with film education practices elsewhere in the world.

The motivations for such international engagements are self-evident for those involved in film education. Speaking with diverse film education practitioners across Europe, I often hear voiced a sense of isolation or loneliness, and a frustrated desire to get beyond precursory debates about the basic value of cinema in classrooms. National histories of film education frequently reflect a tendency for initiatives to be fragmented and non-cohesive, a series of short-term endeavours with little continuity or consciousness of each other. Until these relatively recent international impulses, the isolation of many European film education practitioners has contributed to an almost absurdist sense of amnesia whereby disparate projects each unwittingly attempt to reinvent the wheel in ignorance of similar endeavours that have taken place elsewhere,

either geographically or historically. In Sweden, Per Eriksson and Malena Janson (Eriksson, 2016) have unearthed film education materials from 1908 to 1922 wherein discussions of nascent approaches to film education and the use of film in Stockholm classrooms bear uncanny similarities to the interventions of newer programmes in the twenty-first century. Film education, it would seem, is subject to the same dangers of 'cultural amnesia' that Alain Bergala (2016: 40) has identified for film-makers more generally.

Bergala's body of thought, achieving its most cohesive articulation in *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2016), can be seen both to reflect and to play an active role in this internationalist *zeitgeist*. Read alongside the international impulses of many film education projects in 2018, *The Cinema Hypothesis* seems to voice a powerful yet problematic sense of universalism, of Cinema with a capital 'C' – a sense of speaking to, and drawing from, global film culture, while purporting to open up access to the fundamental questions of cinema so that they might be made available to all. The universalism enacted by *The Cinema Hypothesis* now goes beyond the page, since Bergala's work has begun to serve as a significant agent of interconnectivity in European film education over the past decade, influencing and even inaugurating new programmes of learning outside France. From their initial inception in Paris, Bergala's ideas have travelled to Spain, where they serve as a core reference point for the A Bao A Qu and Cinema En Curs projects, which cite *The Cinema Hypothesis* as a founding text (Aidelman and Colell, 2014); Germany and Austria, where Bergala's work has had a considerable influence upon the group of scholars working on film education in and around the University of Bremen – such as Bettina Henzler, Winfried Pauleit, Stefanie Schüluter and Manuel Zahn; to Lithuania, Finland and now, beyond Europe, to India and Japan through 'Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse' (CCAJ), itself a direct vehicle for Bergala's continuing pedagogical experiments in film education. Bergala's body of ideas on film education might thus be regarded as a pedagogical technology, an international agent of change that continues to demonstrate considerable propensity for crossing borders and transcending national and sociocultural differences. As Mark Reid (2018) has remarked, Bergala's work seems to demonstrate a notable degree of 'translatability' in the syncretic manner in which it has been taken up by diverse cultures, adapting the specificity of Bergala's ideas to localized contexts.

This article will reconsider *The Cinema Hypothesis*, and in particular the propensity of Bergala's ideas to serve as an agent of interconnectivity, within a slowly emergent global field of film education. For, indeed, both Bergala's work and the international initiatives in film education it has helped cultivate prompt broader questions of a *global* field of film education lying beyond the more circumscribed international impulses of particular projects. Over the past few decades, film studies discourses have questioned the epistemological implications that national and transnational framings create for our perspectives on film culture. National and supranational structures have been subjected to post-structuralist critiques in which the body of a nation (as Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim (2010: 14) describe China) is seen 'as a larger arena connecting difference, so that a variety of regional, national, and local specificities impact upon each other in various types of relationships ranging from synergy to contest'. Amid such nuanced discussions, the category of 'the global' seems blunt, outsized and perhaps outdated, embodying an 'idealistic notion of ... political internationalization, a metaphorical idea of the global-local' (Bâ and Higbee, 2012: 8). Étienne Balibar has discussed the potential 'violence of the universal' (Birnbbaum, 2017), the manner in which globalizing, universalist projects frequently enact strategies of exclusion and normalization upon their constituent parts, hostile to locality and

difference. Mark Reid (2018) has discussed some of the issues facing a metonymic identity of 'Europeanness' in pan-European approaches to film education, in which national 'parts' are subsumed, sometimes uncomfortably, into a projected European 'whole'. How much more of a dizzying, fraught enterprise is it to speak of a *global* field of film education beyond Europe?

From one perspective, a global field of film education can undoubtedly be said to exist, comprised of the disparate activities of diverse film education practitioners across the world, many of whom are as yet unaware of each other. And yet, from a different perspective, can a body of activity as yet so disparate, unconnected, un-self-aware and lacking in any functional sense of community even be referred to as a field? James Clifford (1997: 52) has discussed 'a field' as being a space defined by an onlooker, and, in this respect, any attempt to comprehend a global field of film education would seem a productive, semi-imaginative act that, to an extent, 'enacts the object of its own enquiry' (MacDonald, 2011: 313). In this respect, a global field of film education would seem to exist if we choose to look for it, if we choose to *enact* a global field of film education.

While universalisms have traditionally been viewed with considerable scepticism by the left, a number of progressive thinkers (among them Jacques Rancière, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri) have recently converged on the pragmatic value that universalist approaches may still hold for those deciding consciously to act as if 'there is only one world' (Badiou, 2011), a unified global space upon which one can achieve purchase. Recalling James Clifford's (2013: 201) discussion of 'big-enough' stories, to attempt to speak globally would seem a necessary corrective in 2018, given the circumscribed bounds of many pre-existing perspectives on film education, and the tendency to reinscribe a depressingly familiar Eurocentrism. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015: 78) have discussed how 'heterogeneous universalisms' that 'integrate difference rather than [erase] it' can function as correctives to the tendency to erect barriers (whether consciously or not) between the comfortable orbit of one's own discourse and what lies beyond it: 'Rejecting [the category of the universal] ... risks Orientalising other cultures, transforming them into an exotic Other. The old Orientalist divides are inadvertently sustained in the name of a misguided anti-universalism' (ibid.: 77). There would thus seem to be a corresponding imperative to de-Westernize our conceptions of film culture and move beyond formulations of 'west and the rest' towards 'polycentric, multi-directional, non-essentialized alternatives to Eurocentric theoretical and historical perspectives found in film as both an artistic medium and an academic field of study' (Bâ and Higbee, 2012: 1).

Such developments in film studies are just as relevant for our nascent understandings of film education, and it is one of the core contentions of this study that the emergent body of discourses surrounding film education must consider the category of 'the global'. This essay, while explicitly focused on developments in film education within a European context, also aspires to question the borders of European film education activities in the interests of a progressive globalism. Higbee and Lim (2010: 15) have written of a 'transnational imaginary' as an epistemological tool encouraging the reframing and reorientation of our perspectives upon film culture. Similarly, I would posit the usefulness of a global imaginary as a corrective to entrenched, often invisible, structures of Western and Eurocentric thought, for, as Rod Stoneman (2013: 59) has remarked, 'reflecting on international film and media training in the current epoch, we inevitably navigate within the framework imposed by a global monoculture'. My appeal to the global thus resonates with Elia Shohat and Robert Stam's (1994: 48) notion of 'polycentric multiculturalism':

Although we try to set multicultural issues in a global context, we make no claim to 'cover' the globe in a lordly imperial sweep. Our call to 'think globally' is not a demand that individual scholars become omniscient polymaths, but rather the designation of a *collective project* (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 6).

Mark Reid and Andrew Burn have written of 'a universal entitlement on behalf of all citizens to be introduced to the fundamentals of the moving image, and to be able to master some of its language' (Burn and Reid, 2012: 316). Such a thrilling, utopian idea, applied beyond Europe to the rest of the world, requires us to think, cautiously, of the global, and in terms of the pragmatic, heterogeneous universalisms advocated by Srnicek and Williams. To do so is to rise to the challenge set by Ursula Le Guin and James Clifford (Clifford, 2013: 184–9) to mount utopian critiques endeavouring to imagine possibilities beyond the circumscribed affordances of contemporary global politics – "'critical utopias" which seek what Tom Moylan calls "seditious expression of social change" carried on in a "permanently open process of envisioning what is not yet"' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 11).

The appearance of an English-language edition of *The Cinema Hypothesis*, 14 years after its initial publication in French, gives us the opportunity to reconsider Bergala's ideas within the *praxis* of a global field of film education: the productive manner in which such a field is enacted passively through acts of description and actively through projects forging connections and inaugurating programmes of learning. If there can be said to be such a thing as a global field of film education, then, through its international influence within Europe alone (and now in Asia and South America through CCAJ), *The Cinema Hypothesis* might be a strong contender to be one of its early canonical texts. While *The Cinema Hypothesis* was initially written for a fairly localized audience of French cineastes and film education practitioners (perhaps not imagining a readership beyond the national), the current uptake of Bergala's ideas internationally reorients the text so that it now speaks beyond France. Thus, while Bergala's universalist invocations of Cinema with a capital 'C' may initially have been understood simply as heightened rhetoric, *The Cinema Hypothesis* now seems itself to be part of a process of envisioning a global, universal arena within which to speak about film education, particularly as more film cultures encounter Bergala's cine-pedagogy through CCAJ. As Nuria Aidelman, who imported aspects of Bergala's approach to Spain after studying with him at the University of the Sorbonne, writes: 'the universe of film offers thousands of adventures where, each and every one of us, with our own sensibility and individual taste, can find [our] own place' (Aidelman and Collel, 2014: 27).

And yet, after a presentation by Bergala at a recent conference, one of my colleagues remarked that Bergala's perspective on film education was 'very '60s and very French'. Such comments point to an inevitable degree of cultural, national and historical specificity in Bergala's approach that may problematize its status as a potential tool of international interconnectivity. As we begin to imagine and enact a global field of film education, *The Cinema Hypothesis* – a body of ideas that seems set to continue to serve as an agent of international connectivity among film educators – must face the full force of a progressive cultural critique. How does Bergala's work fit within attempts to imagine a global, 'polycentric multicultural' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 48) approach to film education, and alongside attempts to employ universalisms in the service of progressive, internationalist ideals? To what extent are Bergala's ideas constrained by the highly particularized, provincialized cultural location from which they arise, and

to what extent are they a translatable technology, able to sustain and encourage the many encounters with difference that one experiences when attempting to consider a global field of film education?

Conscious of its place in the inaugural edition of the English-language *Film Education Journal*, this article deliberately reaches for a 'de-westernizing gesture' (Bâ and Higbee, 2012: 10). While ostensibly functioning as a study and, to a certain extent, a celebration of film education initiatives within Europe, it is nonetheless my intention to situate a constant irritant within that frame, a grain of sand in the eye that forces us to look beyond the local to a semi-imaginary global arena where 'no single community or part of the world, whatever its economic or political power should be epistemologically privileged' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 48). My perspective here is informed by plural, parallel experiences as a film education practitioner working with Bergala's ideas in diverse classrooms as a film tutor for CCAJ in Scotland, a teacher of both practical and theoretical approaches to film in primary and secondary classrooms throughout Edinburgh and at undergraduate and postgraduate level at the universities of Exeter and Glasgow, as a delegate of several international discussion events on film education, and as a film-maker myself. I therefore draw on a diverse range of experiences, and attempt to reconcile them here within a scholarly register. Writing as a film education practitioner, I am keenly aware of the manner in which to write upon a global field of film education is to *enact* or, to recall Roy Wagner (1981), *invent* such a field, and thus the extent to which I write not as an impartial observer but as an activist, invested and actively involved in the developing state of film education.

## Particular universalisms: *The Cinema Hypothesis*

The first English translation of *The Cinema Hypothesis* has allowed us the opportunity to re-evaluate some of Bergala's core ideas about film education, and to consider their potential 'universal' claim within the developing international framework that, in many instances, Bergala's work has helped inaugurate. *The Cinema Hypothesis* emerged from the development of a national, egalitarian programme of popular education in which Bergala was involved at the behest of the then French Minister of Education, Jack Lang, which looked to open up access to the arts for all. While Bergala's ideas arose from a highly specific sociocultural location in France, the considerable resonance that *The Cinema Hypothesis* has subsequently found internationally indicates something in Bergala's approach that seems to transcend the local. Considered within an emergent global field of film education, might *The Cinema Hypothesis* – perhaps one of the early canonical texts of global film education – help point the way towards a film education for all?

Read in 2018, *The Cinema Hypothesis* is a provocative mix of the frustrating and the inspirational. While many of Bergala's ideas would seem to remain as stimulating and essential as upon first publication, other aspects seem somewhat dated and fustian before a contemporary critique. Despite these limitations, however, I will argue that *The Cinema Hypothesis* does potentially allow diverse global interlocutors to begin thinking in semi-concrete terms about what a universal approach to film education might consist of, an approach opening up the potential for the radical democratic access to cinema that Burn and Reid (2012: 315) posited in their notion of a 'cinema for all'. As I will argue, Bergala achieves this principally through the notion of disruption, theorizing a radical approach to classroom-based encounters with film that opens up subjective space for participants to disrupt the ongoing, collective project of cinema, both as viewers and as film-makers. Given art cinema's traditional associations with



elitism – the *financial* elite possessing the resources to make films, and the *cultural* elite having access to film culture (and the familiar construction of such elites as largely white, male, heterosexual and middle class) – one of the most imperative tasks of a critically imagined global field of film education would seem to be to *open up* access to cinema to make space for Shohat and Stam's (1994: 48) 'polycentric multiculturalism'. Given Bergala's predilections for what might seem an anti-populist canon of 'great art' populated largely by middle-class white men, *The Cinema Hypothesis* perhaps seems an odd vehicle through which to pursue such a radical democratization of film culture. I will argue, however, that Bergala's thought, while remaining to some extent 'very French' and 'very '60s', still contains within it the seeds of a radical universalist access to film-making, some early coordinates that may help us begin navigating towards an open cinema.

Re-evaluating *The Cinema Hypothesis* within the context of a global imaginary, I will focus upon five themes that would seem pertinent to film education practitioners in diverse contexts across the world: (1) a particularized approach to film; (2) the proximity of theory and practice; (3) an asystematized approach to analysis; (4) the 'provincial' problems of the universal canon of *The Cinema Hypothesis* and conceptions of taste; and (5) Bergala's theorization of disruption.

### A particularized approach to film

As will no doubt resonate with beleaguered film educators worldwide, *The Cinema Hypothesis* makes incisive address to the marginalized status of film in classrooms, insisting upon a particularized approach to cinema as a distinct medium with a distinct history, requiring its own distinctive approach and discourse: 'Great art in cinema', Bergala (2016: 30) writes, comes 'each time that emotion and thought is born out of a form, a rhythm, that could not have existed but for cinema'. Bergala bucks the tendency to house film within the wider context of media studies, noting at the BFI launch of *The Cinema Hypothesis* that:

there was always a danger of confusing cinema with that of media. This method proposes that you approach a film as a subcategory of the media and media studies, which is a reductive way of approaching it, ignoring its place as an actual art form (BFI Southbank, 2017).

Amid a film education landscape still dominated by approaches inherited from other disciplines (and the instrumentalization of film in the service of other subjects), such a particularized, semi-formalist approach is refreshing, articulating an approach to film education that can be seen to arise from within film culture itself. Such an approach is relatively novel within an Anglo-Saxon context, and Bergala's aesthetic approach has, perhaps inevitably, found many enthusiastic recipients within England and Scotland, where I encountered Bergala's cine-pedagogy through CCAJ. As the Austrian Film Museum's Head of Education, Alejandro Bachmann, has remarked, while particularized approaches to cinema are by no means new, they very rarely make their way into official, institutional writings on film education. Bachmann describes how *The Cinema Hypothesis* advocates an approach to film education that:

makes the medium itself the starting point for reflections on how to teach. Cinema and its passing on is not shaped by our approaches of how to teach. The approaches of how to teach are derived from cinema. It is cinema itself that articulates how it can be taught (BFI Southbank, 2017).

Given the struggles worldwide to counter the marginal place of film in educational curricula, and to inaugurate particularized pedagogical approaches to film, Bergala's incisive insistence on a cine-specific approach seems an important counter that will doubtless resonate in contexts far beyond France.

### Proximity of theory and practice

Central to Bergala's conception of film education is the insistence upon a proximity between theory and practice – of the necessary interrelation of watching, thinking and talking about films on the one hand, and making films on the other. In this respect, *The Cinema Hypothesis* provides a valuable counter to the widespread tendency for film studies to function ostensibly as a film reception studies (Stoneman, 2013: 71).

*The Cinema Hypothesis* explores the possibility of a 'creative analysis', distinguished from 'classical film analysis, whose only purpose is to understand, to decode, to "read the film," as they say in schools' (Bergala, 2016: 74). Such a creative analysis 'would prepare students for, or initiate them into, creative practice ... The analysis is not an end in itself, but a movement toward something else' (ibid.). Bergala advocates a form of analysis informed by one's experience of practical film-making and, simultaneously, a film-making practice informed by one's experience of watching and considering film. The two moments of subjective response – the response of a creator to material in process and the response of a reflective spectator to material that has been fixed – are brought into inseparable alignment. While I was a student at the London Film School, the film-maker Richard Kwietniowski described the process of directing as being, to an extent, the opportunity to 'choose things you like'. Here again, one's experience of watching seems inextricable from the more active, productive and empowered experience of choosing and composing as a director. Bergala (2016: 73) quotes Jean Renoir's provocative contention that 'you must make films yourself, if only in your imagination ... otherwise, you are not worthy of going to the cinema'. Such rousing insistence upon the interrelation between theory and practice perhaps stems from the sense of holism that Bergala inherited from the *Cahiers du cinéma*, and mid-twentieth-century French film culture more generally, in which the lines between film-maker, theorist, exhibitor and educator become almost non-existent (as manifest in the work of polymath cineastes such as Rohmer, Truffaut and Bergala himself).

The proximity of Bergala's writing to the experience and practice of film culture is, normatively speaking, somewhat novel within the broader context of institutionalized film studies discourses, which have largely become detached from the direct experience of film-making. The London Film School's former head of studies, Alan Bernstein, remarked to me that perhaps the last theorist to attempt (and succeed) in pursuing a theory that remained in dialogue with contemporary film-makers was André Bazin in the 1950s. A similar sense pervades Bergala's work, of presenting theory that, to an extent, must speak to and justify itself before those actively involved in the craft of film-making. In an interview with Nuria Aidelman, Bergala states, 'if we do not formulate our questions from the point of view of the creative work, then we perform a task that is formal, partial and insignificant' (Bergala, 2014: 13). Describing how academic film studies tends to treat films as 'closed objects' or *fait accompli*, *The Cinema Hypothesis* invites the reader to attempt to swim 'upstream' through a creative analysis that embodies 'a matter of making the logical and imaginative effort necessary to move slightly back upstream in the creative process, to the moment where the filmmaker made his decisions, where the choices were still available' (Bergala, 2016: 74). As Nick Pinkerton (2017: 105) remarked in his review of *The Cinema Hypothesis* for *Sight and Sound*, the creative process of cinema would not seem new, and yet such accounts are



rare in the institutionalized discipline of film studies: “‘Towards a ‘creative analysis’” points to a great deficiency in film critical discourse which tends to consider the actual practical and physical considerations of making a film as entirely secondary, if at all’. Here one might object that the democratic experience of cinema – the relationship most of us will have with cinema in our lifetime – is largely as audience members, and thus that it is perhaps fitting that the dominant, institutionalized critical discourses surrounding cinema are premised more upon reception than production. Perhaps, on a level of *realpolitik*, the democratic experience of cinema is almost always going to be an experience of reception, and in this context Renoir’s remark that one is ‘not worthy’ of going to the cinema unless one has made a film may seem somewhat elitist. Nonetheless, *The Cinema Hypothesis* remains an invigorating counter to the rarely questioned tendency for institutionalized film studies to function ostensibly as reception studies and, as will be discussed below, if the traditional elitism of *who* can make a film is not questioned and disrupted in order to open up such opportunities to as many of us as possible, then the hegemonic structures of power one implicitly hears within talk of ‘great art’ will remain unchallenged.

### Asystematized approaches to analysis

In a further challenge to pre-existing forms of film education, *The Cinema Hypothesis* advocates an asystematized approach to cinema, resisting Metzian attempts to extrapolate a static film ‘language’ that can then be prescribed to learners. As a filmmaker, I have often found myself frustrated by the tendency of Metzian semiotics towards hard-edged taxonomic abstractions that seem to achieve only troubled applications to an unruly and intensely worldly ongoing practice. Dismissing codified notions of cinematic grammar, Bergala insists upon an approach prioritizing sensation, feeling and the immediate over the extracted, linear dictates of ‘story’ and ‘theme’, emphasizing the importance of a holistic, haptic response to a given film in a given moment:

Jean-Marie Straub ... once told me ... that for a shot to be worth the effort, there must be ‘something that burns in the shot.’ What burns is the life and presence of the things and people that inhabit it. And what if, in schools, people talked more about this life that burns or doesn’t burn in cinematic shots, rather than always talking about this ‘grammar’ of images that has never existed, and about the ‘big subjects’ that suffocate cinema? (Bergala, 2016: 32)

Bergala (2016: 91) compares Chabrol’s and Renoir’s divergent treatments of the same scene in *Madame Bovary* (1991 and 1934 respectively) to highlight the differences, disparities and outright contradictions in equally considered aesthetic approaches, concluding that there is no single, correct way to approach cinema:

If schools want to teach cinema as an art, they must discard once and for all the old scholastic idea according to which there is one, and only one, right way to say something, and one right way to film a scene or a shot in cinema (Bergala, 2016: 92).

Bergala goes further, advocating that not only should we get rid of the notion of ‘correct filmmaking’, but that the familiar practice of breaking down cinema into quasi-linguistic units, such as shot sizes, in itself is a distraction from an engagement with the ‘primary text’ of cinema. Bergala (2014: 13) states that ‘to speak of how the shot scales are used is not worthwhile or at all useful, even if it is comforting’. Illustrating this notion, Alejandro Bachmann describes how:

I once had a class ... a four-hour session on how film tells stories – and I didn't know anything about that class. I showed them the extract, and then I asked them 'so what did you see'? This was a class that had already learned the right words for shots, the right words for montage techniques, and what happened was they said 'this is a wide shot', and when I went to the next shot, they said 'and this is a top shot', and when I went to the next shot, they said 'I think this is the start of a parallel montage', and so on. The thing is, [their] teacher was very proud of their students. But, actually [I wanted to tell] those students 'this has nothing to do with cinema what you are doing now, and this has also nothing to do with you – as a person' ... To me, as far as I understood Bergala, it is very much about getting away [from] these terms, getting away [from] the knowledge that everyone has, and reacting very directly towards cinema ... I teach a lot of children – it is something they do not learn at all at the moment. What they learn is things they can then put a cross on in multiple-choice questionnaire – but they are not asked about their subjectivity. They are not asked about how they react to things and then explain why they react to things (BFI Southbank, 2017).

Here we can begin to start understanding the radical theory of disruption advanced in *The Cinema Hypothesis*. Through insistence on the proximity of theory and practice, Bergala's cine-pedagogy aspires to open up the twin moments of subjective response in film culture to students of all ages – as audience member, responding subjectively to material in a fixed form, and as creator, with influence upon material that is not yet fixed. In Bachmann's anecdote, the priority is the personal, subjective response of the student, not the manner in which the student can recite pre-existing knowledge and consolidated frameworks of understanding. Elsewhere, Rod Stoneman has remarked how:

it is often preferable, in relation to many systems of education based on western models, to break with the mode of secondary education and its process of memorized regurgitation, learning by rote, and individual assessment for exams. Instead, one can explore the reconstitution of the experience of primary education with its focus on play, curiosity and exploration, and group work (Stoneman, 2013: 74).

In undermining pre-established, sedimented systems of knowledge of cinema, Bergala could thus be seen to peel back authoritative assumptions to make space for the incoming subjectivities of new generations encountering film for the first time. In this respect, *The Cinema Hypothesis* inaugurates the possibility of an open cinema, a cinema opening itself to participation and disruption. Invoking the utopian corrective of a global imaginary, one can think outwards from here to the wider *dialectic* of film culture, a living culture that Bergala's approach professes to make permeable. In attempting to open up access in this way, Bergala thus attempts to open cinema to the radical challenges of a polycentric multiculturalism. Recalling Adorno, systems of knowledge can be seen to contain society 'sedimented' within their materials (Paddison, 1997: 98). To insist upon the importance of individual, subjective responses to film as acts that, in themselves, have the potential to intervene into the wider dialectic, is thus to undermine sedimented systems of knowledge and power and, in theory at least, to open up access for anyone to make an intervention into the course of film culture.

While such a notion is thrilling, utopian conceptions of film education do not in themselves inaugurate utopian access to cinema. Such access needs to be opened up moment to moment, within the very contingent environment of a given classroom (or the other, diverse film education spaces documented in the BFI's recent Screening Literacy survey (Reid et al., n.d.)), which themselves are fraught with implicit power structures (Orner, 1992). Pointing to the semi-ironic image from *The 400 Blows* (1959) on the cover of the translation, Nick Pinkerton's review of *The Cinema Hypothesis* (2017) expressed scepticism as to whether such an emancipatory programme could be inaugurated within the relatively authoritarian space of the classroom. Pinkerton's answer to this question, however, is notably individualistic, and the question that Bergala poses in *The Cinema Hypothesis* remains: where else are we to begin building a film education for all, an open cinema, if not in state school classrooms?

### **Problems with Bergala's universal canon of, and approach to, world cinema**

The stimulating provocations for film education in *The Cinema Hypothesis* are complicated by the sometimes-dated suppositions and frameworks in which Bergala couches his arguments. Read in the bleak light of 2018, many aspects of *The Cinema Hypothesis* will incur cynicism, not least Bergala's quasi-Leavisite emphasis on a canon of 'great' film-makers (most of whom are white, male and dead), alongside dusty sentiments about 'great art' that re-enact a great divide (Huysen, 1988) between modernism and mass culture. Bergala recycles familiar Adornian conceptions of a high art that resists the viewer, in contrast with the satisfaction, pleasure and functionality of a commodified popular cinema:

The artwork that will matter in a person's life is initially resistant, and does not immediately offer itself up with all the attractions of instantaneous seduction belonging to the disposable films that overwhelm screens and media bandwidth every Wednesday (Bergala, 2016: 42).

Such an anti-populist approach (drawing on familiar conceptions of a feminized mass culture selling 'seduction' and 'attraction' (Bergala, 2016: 60)) ignores the manner in which popular film-makers such as Bong Joon-ho, Alfonso Cuarón, Kathryn Bigelow, Greta Gerwig, David Lynch, Christopher Nolan and Guillermo del Toro (to name but a few) have proven that the aesthetics and haptic address of art cinema are not irreconcilable with pleasure, entertainment and genre.

While Bergala rightly rails against the 'cultural amnesia' frequently underlying school-based film production (advocating that children's nascent experiences of film culture be couched within an expansive history of film), his conceptions of a global, universally inclusive body of art cinema demonstrate all the familiar problems with canon-formation. Bergala's conception of a world cinema is decidedly French, comprised almost entirely of French film-makers (Renoir, Truffaut, Godard) and the male, auteurist directors previously canonized by the cineastes from the *Cahiers du cinéma* (such as Hitchcock, Rossellini, Kiarostami, Ozu). In this respect, Bergala's theory of great art falls before almost all of the critiques of the new left. Before feminist, queer and postcolonial critiques in particular, Bergala's 'universal' canon comes up notably short: where are Andrea Arnold, Jane Campion, Claire Denis, Sally Potter and Lynne Ramsay? Where are Terence Davies, Xavier Dolan, Todd Haynes and Derek Jarman? And, in the much more expansive, borderless category of non-Western cinemas, where are Souleymane Cissé, Safi Faye, Haile Gerima, Zacharias Kunuk, Glauber Rocha and Ousmane Sembène, to name but a few?

As might be inferred from the lists above, the canon of great auteurs advanced by *The Cinema Hypothesis* (a canon to an extent instantiated in the clips provided annually by Bergala and CCAJ partners for participants as context for the year's topic) is also defined by a notably classicist, retrospective approach. While this is not to suggest that the films of Renoir, Hitchcock, Rossellini and Ozu are not worthy of considerable continued study, it would seem equally imperative to address the questions of representation that cannot help but be embodied by retrospective canons drawing from moments in film history when the experiences of women, people of colour and members of the LGBT community were even more unlikely to be expressed than they are now. Bergala's identification of 'cultural amnesia' and the importance of approaches to film education deeply rooted in film history is important, particularly at a moment in which film education must perhaps, to an extent, pursue strategies of strategic essentialism in order to counter its own peripherality. Equally important, however, is the imperative to address the hegemonic imbalances of representation that classicist canons of art cinema inevitably embody. At the BFI launch of *The Cinema Hypothesis*, Karen Lury described the importance within her own cinematic conversion of encountering, in the University of Santa Barbara's Janet Walker, a *passeur* (in Bergala's terms) who was not male (BFI Southbank, 2017). Accounts of those who are only just starting to see themselves on screen, as popular cinema begins to incorporate a greater concern for issues of representation, are increasingly ubiquitous, and testify to the very real stakes of such representational critiques. If we are to pursue, both locally and globally, a model of film education that looks to honour 'a universal entitlement on behalf of all citizens' (Burn and Reid, 2012: 316) and a 'polycentric multiculturalism' (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 48), then such issues of representation remain key.

Equally problematic for the 'universal' claim of *The Cinema Hypothesis*, is the manner in which a supposedly permeable, inclusive programme of film education shrouds conceptions of cinema that seem notably culturally specific. Overall, Bergala's cine-epistemology, while purporting to be open and asystematic, has a strong resemblance to that espoused by the *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s through the prioritization of naturalist, realist, Bazinian *mise en scène*. While evoking a seemingly universal sense of Cinema with a capital 'C', Bergala is still – to an extent – lionizing a highly particularized, provincialized conception circumscribed by particular tastes. At times, highly critical and even condemnatory critiques of children's work erupt during CCAJ's sharing sessions, frequently in response to aspects of cinematic style that are deemed aesthetically inappropriate, such as the use of music, particular editing techniques, or slow motion. While Bergala and CCAJ should be applauded for creating a forum in which children's film-making is treated so seriously, such objections risk undermining CCAJ's utopian, global sense of inclusivity in seeming to prioritize a particular cinematic aesthetic – realist, naturalistic, fairly unadorned with music or effects, and achieving primary cinematic articulation within shots rather than through montage – that bears marked resemblance to a specifically French tradition of cinema.

Particularly problematic in this respect is the manner in which Bergala recycles André Bazin's Manichean constructions of aesthetic value in cinema by framing out the entire chapter of cinema history converging around 'montage theory'. In doing so, Bergala seems to reinstate deeply entrenched cultural oppositions to particular aesthetics that seem out of place within an inclusive, universalist forum for international film educators. Film-makers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Alexander Dovzhenko, and Russian directors in general, are conspicuously absent both within *The Cinema Hypothesis* and CCAJ. During my five years working with CCAJ, I have seen little or no mention of editing in the project briefs (or 'Rules of the Game'). While there is

an expectation that children will edit their own work, CCAJ gives no instruction as to how such edits might take place, in comparison with the considerable amount of instruction given regarding camera placement. One often has the sense that editing happens 'off screen', and certainly without the same level of attention the programme dedicates to cinematic parameters such as colour, weather and sense of place. In my own teaching, particularly at higher education level, I have attempted to counter many of the intensely useful insights and approaches inherited from Bergala's cine-pedagogy with exercises exploring what might be considered the ying to the yang of Bazinian theory: an aesthetics of cinematic montage. In my experience, the two approaches – while starkly opposed ideologically in the theoretical writings of Bazin and Eisenstein – create a stimulating, complementary friction highly fruitful for students to explore while trying to develop their own sense of aesthetic taste.

### Bergala's notion of disruption

Reflecting on some of the blind spots in Bergala's cine-pedagogy – in particular, its failure to address questions of representation, and its veiled bias towards culturally specific conceptions of cinematic value – it would not seem difficult to see how, from a position of scepticism, *The Cinema Hypothesis* might be viewed as 'very '60s' and 'very French'. However, while Bergala's ideas fall before many of the critiques of the New Left in their reliance upon canons and structures of thought struck through with fraught power imbalances, his theory of disruption allows, crucially, for the incorporation of difference. While *The Cinema Hypothesis* therefore, to an extent, reinstates outdated notions of a great art struck through with gender, racial and class hegemony, Bergala simultaneously shows us the way out: the means of dismantling such hegemonies in the name of an open cinema, and a global, or universal, film culture more worthy of the name.

Bergala's notion of the potential 'disruptions' and encounters with 'radical alterity' afforded children in classrooms by art-based approaches to film evoked cynicism from voices within the culture studies community at the BFI launch of *The Cinema Hypothesis*. The author was questioned in particular as to what could possibly be being 'disrupted' within a quasi-Leavisite programme of cultural edification that, in Bergala's (2016: 56) own words, purports to 'provide a cultural "ski-lift" out of these pseudo-tastes created by marketing'. To dismiss *The Cinematic Hypothesis* for its dustier elements in this manner, via simplistic accusations of paternalism is, however, to overlook the radical challenges that Bergala poses for classroom-based film education, and the institutional practice of film studies more generally. In insisting upon the interlocked importance of the twin moments of aesthetic response, *The Cinema Hypothesis* attempts to open up the full heft of an asystematized cinema to diverse, unruly historical participation in school classrooms. Bergala's refusal to systematize cinema – to insist upon holistic, sensational responses, rather than an ossified cinematic grammar – represents a refusal to use his considerable authority to tell us (as Bazin tried to do) 'what cinema is', thus leaving the great dialectic of cinema open to those who wish to engage with it. To open up such un-dumbed-down access to the fundamental processes of cinematic meaning-making would thus seem indeed to open cinema up to valuable, essential *disruption*.

Here, then, is a theory of film education, and of cinematic culture more generally, where there is room for the particular. Discussing the pragmatic employment of 'universalisms', Srnicek and Williams (2015: 77) have described how 'the universal must be identified not with an established set of principles and values, but rather with an empty placeholder that is impossible to fill definitively'. While cinema is not exactly

an empty placeholder (and, indeed, part of the strength of *The Cinema Hypothesis* is its attempt to stake out cinema as something relatively specific), cinema is an *arena*, a living culture and a metaphysical space in which multiple voices can potentially speak to, and disagree with, each other – in other words, a space for a ‘polycentric multiculturalism’ (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 48). It would thus seem essential that such a space be made permeable, and that a universalism is constructed that ‘integrates difference rather than [erases] it’ (Srnicek and Williams, 2015: 78).

The disruptions that Bergala invites may not be those he intended or desired. Such disruptions may, perhaps inevitably, elide the borders between art, popular culture and, indeed, television, in the way that many contemporary pop auteurs are beginning to do. While notions of art cinema retain lingering, discomfiting associations with dead white men, such associations seem to be changing. What art cinema in 2018 is, or could be, seems increasingly in dialectic: four of the films featured in *Sight and Sound*’s Top Ten of 2016 (including *Toni Erdmann* in top place) were made by women, and one was a luminous, unprecedented exploration of queer blackness. This is not to posit art cinema as being, as yet, any sort of utopian space, but rather to suggest that art cinema need no longer necessarily continue to retain fixed, arbitrary associations with whiteness, maleness and class privilege. Bergala’s theory of disruption potentially forms the basis for a universalist approach to film education, an approach that might, starting in the localized instances when a single student engages with cinema (both as audience and film-maker), begin to start building Burn and Reid’s (2012) notion of a ‘film education for all’ from the ground up. In this respect, Bergala’s utopian, universal conception of film education can perhaps be seen – fittingly – to be deeply local and intimate, arising from the small, specific moments in which the course of cinema is interrupted by the incoming subjectivity of one student.

## Conclusion

It might perhaps be said that every appeal to the universal contains both the possibility of a permeable, inclusive, radical togetherness, and the dangers of circumscription, normalization and violence. To capitalize ‘Cinema’, as Bergala does in *The Cinema Hypothesis*, is to begin to imagine a universal conversation, a space for the dialectics of a ‘polycentric multiculturalism’ (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 48). Yet simultaneously, to erect the banner of the universal is to veil the specific location of the speaker, and it thus remains an imperative for the progressive, nascent praxis of a global field of film education to declare such specificities.

Considering the metonymic nature of collective bodies – every time a collection of disparate parts are assembled as a whole – it would undoubtedly seem easier to achieve a sense of cohesion and functionality within narrower universalisms, smaller collectivities where the constituent parts possess a shared resonance, language or cultural similarity. The attempts of the recent BFI-led European Film Education Framework to reach a set of universal coordinates for European film education proved, unsurprisingly, somewhat fraught. Participants described a divide between conflicting approaches to film education arising, respectively, from northern and southern Europe: northern European (particularly British and Irish) approaches centred around notions of literacy, in contrast to southern European approaches (in particular from France, Spain and Italy) centred around more haptic notions of the aesthetic, sensation and pleasure. Perhaps the notion of a universal, all-sum global field of education, is ultimately that of a cacophony. Considering the difficulties finding a consensus even within Europe, how much more impossible might such a process be if the frame did not stop at Europe,



and included Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania? What would the use of such a potentially dysfunctional, cacophonous forum be? What could one achieve within this universal forum, and what, indeed, might one try to achieve? Perhaps we can see, in multinational bodies such as the European Union, a sense of commonality stretched to the maximum. Is looking for consensus amid the cacophonous diversity of global culture simply futile and unnecessary?

I would argue not. Given the current fragmented, disparate state of film education, cross-cultural conversation and collective forums would seem essential, and the tenaciousness and vigour of the European international impulses articulated by projects such as 'Cinéma, cent ans de jeunesse' would seem testament to this. While celebrating the achievements of such valuable European initiatives, however, it remains necessary to continue challenging the assumed boundaries of cultural inclusivity, in terms of who is implicitly framed in and who is framed out. In 2018, encounters with difference seem as fraught and crucial an aspect of contemporary experience as they have ever been, and continuing to reinscribe the supposedly safe frameworks and allegiances of global politics risks a destructive solipsism. The notion in *The Cinema Hypothesis* of 'alterity' – of encounters with a radical sense of difference – might well here be extended to include encounters with difference on a wider cultural level, as part of a global field of film education. Such a field must itself remain open to the disruptions of difference, seeking an "'uncentred" version of knowledge that gives credit to multiple viewpoints in order to arrive at original and innovative ways of studying film history, theory and practice in a globalized context' (Bâ and Higbee, 2012: 13). There is a need to break away from 'the Euro-American dominance of theoretical models, to explore new theoretical positions that can emerge from sources outside of the traditional Western spheres of influence' (ibid.: 12).

Given the strong ecology of French film culture, it would seem both justified and inevitable that international (and, to an extent, global) leadership in certain aspects of film education should come, at this historical juncture, from France. While such cultural strength should be celebrated, however, as a valuable source of cohesion for an international field of film education still characterized as disparate, invisible and fragmented, we must remain wary of the problems accompanying any hegemonic structure of thought. Perhaps the construction of an aesthetic always involves a framing out of some parameters and modalities, and a prioritization of others in the formation of a decisive sensory system – a distinctive way of seeing. The French film culture projected by *The Cinema Hypothesis* and CCAJ, a strong aesthetic with a proven international resonance, is not necessarily required to provide the means to its own negation. At the same time, such an aesthetic must not be mistaken as universal, as the *only* possible aesthetic or conception of cinema, for to obscure alternatives and difference within programmes of education is to circumscribe the possibilities we open up for learners.

In the broad terms discussed by Mark Salber Phillips (Phillips and Schochet, 2004), global cinema might be conceived as a tradition – a broad, cacophonous dialectic around notions of cinematic form, content, function and context. Perhaps the most utopian conception of cinema is, then, of a global conversation. Rod Stoneman has imagined an open, utopian cinema as a global dialectic:

a dialogue leading to a dialectical synthesis, and to an interdependence working between oppositional filmmakers in different parts of the world, that refuses a return to old versions of imitation which were responses to an uninformed appropriation of the cultures of others (Stoneman, 2013: 73).

Our motivation in film education should be to pass on, and open up, the tradition, conversation or, indeed, *argument* of cinema to new participants, both as film-makers and audiences. In doing so, we should be careful to remember the aphorism often attributed to Gustav Mahler that tradition is not 'the worship of ashes' but 'the preservation of fire'. In passing on the many torches of cinema, we must be careful to pass on a quality of attention to the specific forms and sensations of cinema, and this *The Cinema Hypothesis* helps us do through its insistence on a specificity of approach, on the interlocking importance of watching *and* making films, and on approaches to film analysis that prioritize immediate, subjective responses over sedimented, codified understandings of cinema. Crucially, however, we must also be careful not to circumscribe the possibilities of cinema, either in terms of particular aesthetics, or implicit notions of who can participate and who cannot. On this level, *The Cinema Hypothesis* remains ambivalent, for it imposes implicit limitations while simultaneously showing us the way to navigate around them.

Mark Lilla (2017) recently bemoaned the manner in which exclusionary strands of identity politics have undermined the potential for a democratic 'we'. The 'we's' of the past, however, must be replaced by more critically constructed 'we's' of the present and future. While aspects of *The Cinema Hypothesis* would seem to risk circumscribing the 'we' of Cinema, Bergala provides us with some of the tools required to build a new, compelling 'we' for a global field of film education, and an open cinema beyond. Rereading and, to an extent, reshaping Bergala's ideas through the notion of disruption opens the door to an approach to film education that might indeed be able to bear some of the weighty requirements of a 'universal'. Bergala's thought allows us to imagine how, if we are to build such a sense of universalism, we will need to do so moment to moment, through the small, intimate and localized disruptions created when we open up access for one student to intervene subjectively into the ongoing dialectic of global cinema. While such an idea is utopian, given the many undertakings facing film education practitioners worldwide in 2018, it would seem crucial to move beyond a pessimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will, as James Clifford (1997: 43) has discussed, towards an optimism of the intellect.

## Notes on the contributor

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